DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 403 961 JC 970 124

TITLE	Tyler Junior College, Exploring America's Communities.
INSTITUTION	Tyler Junior Coll., TX.
SPONS AGENCY	American Association of Community Colleges, Washington, DC.; National Endowment for the Humanities (NFAH), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Jan 97
NOTE	7p.; In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book (New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997); see JC 970 087.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*American Studies; Community Colleges; *Cultural Pluralism; Curriculum Development; Instructional Improvement; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Multicultural Education; Program Descriptions; Two Year Colleges; United States History; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS	Tyler Junior College TX

ABSTRACT

In 1996, Texas's Tyler Junior College (TJC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. TJC's action plan goals were to solicit administrative endorsement and support of the project, to infuse the existing curriculum with at least one pluralism concept among specified courses, to provide opportunities for faculty dialogue pertaining to cultural diversity, to establish multicultural awareness throughout the campus and community, and to initiate student pluralism projects. The program's accomplishments included making presentations to the college president, the Instructional Counsel, and the Faculty Senate about the program; implementing a new interdisciplinary course examinig the cultural development of America; hosting a luncheon for faculty to explore identity issues; developing a bibliography on pluralism; and initiating an in-service training program to explore cultural differences. The college also hosted a speakers' series, an "International Week," a discussion in the school paper about race relations, a cultural diversity dinner for 500 community attendees, an exhibit on the North American Indian, a Mexican Folklorica Ballet, and a modern language program. Students participated an art exhibition, a gospel choir performance at a luncheon, and the Pluralism Committee. Classroom conversations on cultural diversity and current events have begun. (HAA)

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Tyler Junior College
Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

JC 970 124

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TYLER JUNIOR COLLEGE

EXPLORING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES: IN QUEST OF COMMON GROUND

TYLER JUNIOR COLLEGE PROGRESS REPORT

I. INTRODUCTION

Tyler Junior College was established in 1926 and has a strong transfer program, as well as a workforce training component through technical/vocational and continuing education. We have an enrollment of approximately 8500 full/part-time students each semester and 15,000 non-credit students per year. Located between Dallas and Shreveport, Tyler is an urban community of 75,000 people. The community is comprised of a diverse population, with 20% African American, 65% Anglo, and 15% Hispanic. Unfortunately, economic and social division continue to characterize the residential patterns of the city. Enrollment patterns at the College mirror that of the community, with the exception of a small but increasing Hispanic population. The College attracts enrollment from surrounding rural communities, as well as from several cities in Texas. It is the fifth largest community college in the state and known for quality and beauty. Tyler Junior College is unique because of a traditional campus life, its pivotal role in economic development, and sponsorship of the arts.

II. ACTION PLAN GOALS

A. Solicit administrative endorsement and support of project
B. Infuse existing curriculum with at least one pluralism concept among specified courses
C. Provide opportunities for faculty dialogue pertaining to cultural diversity
D. Establish multicultural awareness throughout the campus and community
E. Initiate student pluralism projects

III. ACCOMPLISHMENTS

A. Presentations were made to the college president, Dr. Bill Crowe, to the Instructional Counsel, and to the Faculty Senate. All gave strong endorsements to the project.

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B. We implemented a new course, "The American Experiment" that brings together American History and English composition to organize and analyze historical data and examine the broad cultural development of the US through writing and discussion. Community leaders served as resource persons for this class. In addition to this specified course, faculty members across the disciplines pledged additional pluralism components in their respective courses.

C. SPECIAL OCCASIONS

(1) Instructional Deans provided a Great Teaching/Great Learning luncheon for all faculty to explore the issues of determining the American identity through presentations and roundtable discussions.

(2) The pluralism committee developed and distributed an annotated bibliography on Pluralism issues to be infused across the curriculum. From this bibliography, the President's Reading Group chose to study *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *In the Lake of the Woods*, and *The End of Education*.

(3) Pluralism/Identity Committee and Instructional Deans initiated in-service training to explore cultural differences. A particularly effective effort related to Sivasaliasm Thiagarajan's flexible simulation game, BARANGA. This simulation provides a model in which players analyze their differences with new insight and perspective.

IV. CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS PROJECTS

A. A campus-wide faculty committee planned and implemented a speakers' series open to the community with the theme, "Ethical Issues in Pluralistic America." Speakers included the award-winning performer Gregory Alan-Williams, Bertrice Berry, Ph.D. from Kent State, Robert M. Steele, Ph.D. from Poynter Institute for Media Studies, and Charles Pellegrino, Ph.D., the "Father of Jurassic Park."

B. Government classes sponsored International Week, "That We May All Be One." Two thousand people attended this festive event which included displays of flags, representations of products and people from around the world, cultural arts, and samples of international cuisine. Attendees included regional college and public school students, as well as community participants. This activity was open to the public with no admission charge.

C. The student newspaper featured a series pertaining to race relations on campus, including student interviews.

D. Community outreach included Tyler Junior College and Big Brothers/Big Sisters co-sponsoring a multicultural diversity dinner with 500 community attendees. The Honorable Ronald Kirk, Mayor of Dallas, was the featured speaker.

E. Tyler Junior College and the Tyler Museum of Art co-sponsored the exhibit, "The North American Indian." This exhibit featured Edward S. Curtis' original portfolio of photogravures and 20 volumes of text. This unparalleled collection of Native American life was donated to Tyler Junior College by Dr. and Mrs. Tom Smith.

F. Tyler Junior College and the Hispanic Association of East Texas co-sponsored the Mexico-based Folklorica Ballet. Over 700 attendees from throughout the community enjoyed this colorful event on campus.

G. Tyler Junior College's Modern Language Program coordinated the community's elementary schools' bilingual education presentation of *La Posada* on our campus.

V. STUDENT PROJECTS

A. A student-generated art exhibit explored the question of "What It Means To Be An American" and invited viewers to interact by writing publicly-displayed responses to the works.

B. The Student Senate provided decorations and hospitality for the luncheon introducing our Mentor, Dr. Carmen Salazar, to the campus and provided student guides for her campus tour.

C. The Tyler Junior College Gospel Choir provided the entertainment for this luncheon.

D. The Pluralism Committee included student representation.

VI. CONVERSATION

Members of the Pluralism Committee have begun the "conversation" within the classroom on issues of cultural diversity by using current events appropriate to the course work to stimulate student discussion and to increase awareness. Examples of extended discussions and written responses include the issues raised by the O. J. Simpson trials, the Rodney King trial, immigration issues, and affirmative action policies.

VII. OBSTACLES AND WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

The mind-set on our campus and in our community creates reluctance to change the traditional curriculum. While we are increasing awareness and promoting dialogue across campus, we see the need of developing a systematic approach to curriculum revision and faculty development relating to effective pedagogy addressing diversity. We also have a need for development addressing conflict resolution and techniques in bringing to the open "simmering problems" relating to racism, sexism, etc. This community strongly reflects the ethnocentrism that characterizes the East Texas culture.

VIII. RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

A. What Does It Mean To Be An American?

Responses From Colleagues:

"Commitment to freedom, individualism, creativity, rights/responsibilities, privileges"

"A patchwork quilt made up of diverse pieces"

"A melting pot"

"A productive tax paying contributor to society"

"A diverse community that somehow manages to function"

"A cake recipe with all ingredients needed to make a good cake"

B. What Divides Us As Americans?

"Culture, Religions, Race, Religion, Gender, Competitiveness, Individualism, Greed"

C. What Brings Us Together

"Tragedy, Shared History, Patriotism, Education, Common Language"

D. What Do We Have In Common?

"An idealism that gives us hope for the future"

"A humanitarian spirit"

"Creativity"

IX. CONCLUSION

"We have come a long way but have a long ways to go." This quote from a staff member is only part of our story, as is this outline response for our report. We feel compelled to report "our story" in this conclusion, to tell more than the documented formality required:

At Tyler Junior College, the people who have worked closely with the "In Quest of Common Ground" objectives this past year have felt that we had a jump start on the project. Instead of beginning with an administratively-initiated group of the usual three people who were to act as coordinators and liaisons for the grant's fulfillment in connection with the National Endowment for the Humanities efforts, we began with a much larger core committee made up of faculty from several Humanities academic departments and two deans who all responded to the opportunity offered via the "Common Ground" teleconference simply because we clearly saw the need for help on our campus and in our community. The committee meetings themselves, then, spontaneously became mini-seminars--dialogues concerning problems spinning off cultural diversity in our families, community and College. During these meetings, we shared announcements of service organizations, program opportunities, and special needs among people in our community. We also shared personal "eye witness" stories of little cultural victories and examples of prejudicial treatment. Informal and octopus-like from its beginning, the committee grew to include a person from the library, from media-services, students, and the occasional drop-ins. The committee seemed to become, in fact, Common Ground. The dialogue that developed was greatly aided and abetted because every faculty and staff member on our campus is networked

via computer. Many of us developed a "Common Ground" file in our e-mail program for collecting all sorts of ideas and data. Actually, then, our beginning for this project was probably similar to the end result on many southern-oriented campuses.

And the waves continue to vibrate outwards. The latest important initiative toward the search for common ground has come from our Director of Student Activities, Scott Nalley, and the Student Senate, which, in turn, set a fire under some students in the new team class for history/English; "The American Experiment." The idea is that next spring we should create a real quilt-of-many-colors called "The TJC Family" with pieces contributed by the various TJC organizations, classes, or anyone so-inclined, have quilting parties to finish it by culturally diverse quilters from our community, and hang it with ceremony in a place of honor in the student center. From that idea, then, came another student-generated notion of the team class sponsoring an exhibit in connection with the quilt-hanging that would be a study of their very American but diverse origins. One student, for example, openly, for the first time, discussed in her history class her ancestors who were slaves on a plantation. Other students shared her anguish and her pride. For the hoped-for exhibit, she has offered the possibility of sharing a quilt made by her enslaved great-great grandmother together with copies of early photographs of ancestors.

One small step, perhaps. But we are deeply grateful for this bit of evidence that we have, indeed, come a long way, even if we do have a long way to go.